A Kremlinologist Tries to Strike a Balance

By Edward Crankshaw

The following is a condensation of the foreword to "The Penkovsky Papers" by the British journalist and expert on Soviet Russia.

I IMAGINE that the general reader will be most fascinated by Penkovsky's inside account of the workings of the Soviet intelligence system. He may very well be appalled and dismayed by their scope and sheer magnitude. But I think we should try to keep a sense of proportion here.

I am not for a moment suggesting that neither the British nor the American secret services are anything like so heavily staffed as the KGB and GRU. The Russians, not to put too fine a point on it, have always been nuts about espionage and counterespionage and they have always been hair-raisingly reckless in the expenditure of manpower.

I am quite sure that the material the Russians receive from their agents is not worth anything like the expenditure of manpower, ingenuity and cash which they consider an appropriate price. I am not an expert in these matters, but there is one thing that stands out even to a layman: that is, that some of the most valuable intelligence coups ever achieved by the Russians have fallen into their laps, contributed by oddities like Nunn-May and Fuchs, acting from individual conviction.

Conversely, invaluable information presented to us by Penkovsky was obtained not as a result of the efficiency of our own secret services but as a free gift arising from the idiosyncratic behavior of an individual Russian.

Penkovsky was shocked by the size and magnitude and malevolence of the secret service of which he formed a part. He was also shocked by the behavior of Khrushchev and others. Here, I think, he can be very misleading.

He was brought up as a young Communist and developed into an eager careerist in the regular army, on the lookout for patronage, keen for promotion, cultivating the sort of gifts which enabled him quite naturally and easily to make an extremely useful marriage, one of the privileged new class and enjoying it. It is impossible to decide from his papers the precise point at which the whole thing went sour, and why.

That he took violently against the whole system, for the reasons he gives is entirely understandable; tens of thousands of intelligent Russians —hundreds of thousands, indeed— feel the same way. But this does not lead them to spy on their own country for the benefit of the West.

One thing is very clear—and this should be borne in mind constantly when considering Penkovsky's indictment of Khrushchev as a man actively preparing to launch a nuclear war —and that is that, like so many defectors from the West, this Soviet army colonel was in some measure unbalanced. (A man who will take it upon himself to betray his government because he is uniquely convinced that he is right and it is wrong is by definition unbalanced, although he may also be a martyr.) And almost certainly, this lack of balance made it impossible for him to distinguish between government intentions and government precautions. Or, like so many others, he confused loose, menacing talk with tight-lipped calculation; contingency planning with purposive strategy.

Having said all this, read Penkovsky also for the light he throws on the Soviet world, which is an illumination rarely vouchsafed foreigners.